



**Directorate of
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Benin: Turn Toward Moderation

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An Intelligence Memorandum

State Dept. review completed

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November 1982*

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Summary

*Information available
as of 15 October 1982
was used in this report.*

US Embassy reporting indicates that Benin's leaders, long among the most radical in West Africa, are showing signs of moderation. Cotonou, which had helped the Soviets and Libyans gain a foothold in the region, is now loosening ties with Moscow and Tripoli, reviving relations with France and the United States, and encouraging private enterprise. We believe that President Kerekou—who has ruled in the manner of a committee chairman since seizing power in 1972—is now responding to pressure from the regime's newly ascendant moderate faction to ease dependence on Moscow and Tripoli in hopes of attracting much needed Western economic aid.

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The trend toward moderation has been induced in part by France—Benin's largest trading partner and aid source—which is trying to maintain its influence in the region and to give radical African states like Benin more of an alternative to Moscow and Tripoli. In our view, the willingness of France and its European Community partners to provide crucial assistance will largely determine the extent of Benin's evolution toward more pragmatic policies. France, the former colonial power, has conditioned the full resumption of military aid to Benin on Cotonou severing military ties to Moscow. Considering this, we believe the newly strengthened moderates might either intensify pressure on Kerekou to risk such a break with the Soviets or overthrow him and make the break themselves if they believe Paris will provide the essential backing.

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We believe that further disengagement by Benin from Tripoli and Moscow could set back some Soviet and Libyan gains in West Africa generally and improve prospects for regional stability. In the last decade, the Libyans have established considerable influence in Benin, enabling them to use the country as a base for subversion in the region at the expense of Western interests. Libyan subversive activities have served Soviet interests without requiring direct Soviet challenges to pro-Western states.

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Representatives of neighboring states in recent years have expressed concern to US officials that the Libyan and Communist presence in Benin could endanger the stability of their pro-Western governments. Indeed,

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Nigeria, the region's most powerful state, has pressed Benin to reduce dependence on Moscow and Tripoli, [redacted] Further gains for moderation in Benin would be likely to encourage the region's other moderate states to do more to counter Soviet and Libyan meddling in the region, although we would expect them not to act without seeking additional backing from the West. [redacted]

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Benin's turn toward moderation probably would be limited in scope and could be reversed quickly. We believe the regime's internal divisions will preclude the complete abandonment of socialism and the elimination of Soviet and Libyan influence, at least in the near term. US leverage is generally limited to the indirect influence of bilateral economic aid and support from international financial institutions. Moreover, we believe Benin's leftist faction probably will try to reassert its influence with the help of its foreign patrons. At a minimum, we expect the Soviets and the Libyans to maneuver behind the scenes and use offers of aid to improve the fortunes of their Beninese clients. [redacted]

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We judge that chances for a coup will increase as economic conditions continue to deteriorate. Military officers dissatisfied with low pay and slow promotions, radical influence in the regime, and Kerekou's weak leadership are the most likely instigators of a takeover. There is also a chance, however, that civilian and military radicals, embittered by the regime's turn toward the West, could oust Kerekou. We believe a radical takeover would result in growing Beninese dependence on Communist and Libyan support. [redacted]

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**Benin:
Turn Toward Moderation**

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Introduction

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US Embassy reporting over the past year indicates that the leftist government of Benin—after a decade of radical experimentation—is attempting to reduce its dependence on the Soviets and Libyans in favor of closer relations with the West. This new direction appears to stem from economic necessity, an internal power struggle, and French initiatives.

In our view, further disengagement by Benin from Moscow and Tripoli could help reverse some Soviet and Libyan gains in West Africa and improve prospects for regional stability. Even so, we believe a number of factors—including Benin's internal divisions and likely radical attempts to reassert influence with Soviet and Libyan support—mitigate against complete abandonment of socialism and elimination of Soviet and Libyan influence, at least over the short term.

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This paper examines the extent of Communist and Libyan involvement in Benin, internal and external pressures for change, signs that the regime is trying to disengage from Moscow and Tripoli, and the factors that will determine the pace of disengagement. We thus seek to establish a baseline for Benin's evolving relations with the West, including the United States.

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**Benin's Convoluted
Politics ¹**

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Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Benin has been one of Black Africa's most unstable countries. Regional and ethnic rivalries, a scarcity of natural resources, and a rapidly growing population have hindered economic development and the establishment of national unity. In the first decade after independence, coup followed coup in a succession of nine short-lived, relatively moderate, pro-French civilian and military regimes. No government held power long enough to deal effectively with the serious economic and social problems that plague the country.

The military coup in 1972 that brought the present regime to power represented an attempt to alter radically the country's fortunes by moving it leftward. The coup leaders—junior and middle-grade army officers—sought to purge the pro-French ruling elite and create an authentically

¹ This background assessment of Benin's political factionalism is based on analysis provided over the years by the US Embassy in Cotonou.

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President of Benin, Colonel Mathieu Kerekou functions as a committee chairman within the ruling elite where he is little more than first among equals. His longevity reflects a skillful ability to balance off the ideological, regional, and personal interests of Benin's many competing factions. Despite a left of center outlook and Marxist rhetoric, he now recognizes the need for more pragmatic policies.

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African identity. They selected Col. Mathieu Kerekou, a former sergeant in the French Army from northwest Benin, to head the new regime. Throughout his tenure, Kerekou has been unable to assert his authority over competing factions.

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The leadership vacuum was soon filled by a small but aggressive group of professed Marxists—young Paris-educated civilians who gained behind-the-scenes control of the regime and began to chart its radical political course. By 1975 the government had formally embraced Marxist-Leninism, proclaimed the People's Republic of Benin, and established the People's Revolutionary Party as Benin's sole political party. In the wake of an unsuccessful mercenary attack in 1977, organized by members of the exiled former ruling elite, the radicals reinforced their predominance and brought the regime into a close security relationship with the Soviets, Cubans, and Libyans. An East European-style constitution was adopted and in 1980 military rule gave way to a Soviet-modeled civilian government in which Kerekou was elected to a three-year presidential term and most of his fellow officers retained high positions.

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Although Kerekou's 10 years in office have given Benin the appearance of unaccustomed stability, the country is plagued by a longstanding and bitter power struggle between factions, which involves personal and philosophical disputes, tribal rivalries, and a sharp split between the north and the south. Over the years, growing corruption, foreign Communist backing of the

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radicals, Kerekou's weak leadership, and a lack of technical expertise have prevented the regime from dealing effectively with the country's mounting problems. Three principal groups are involved in the persistent internal power struggle:

- The "leaguers," a small group of well-educated civilians from southern Benin, who are dedicated to radical Marxist ideology. Although lacking a mass base of support, they achieved influential positions in the regime and the ruling party initially by supporting Kerekou's takeover. The leaguers have promoted close ties with the Soviets, Cubans, and Libyans, in return receiving powerful backing from Moscow and Tripoli in their domestic political maneuvering.
- The military, made up predominantly of northerners, which has become disillusioned with the country's Marxist experiment under the leaguers. A small group of senior officers, however, have aided the leaguers by going along with their policies to advance their own political ambitions.
- Civilian moderates, less radical in their ideology and more numerous than the leaguers, who are gaining strength as public discontent with failed Marxist policies increases. Their opposition to the leaguers has grown over the years and they are now pushing for a fundamental political reorientation of Benin along more moderate lines. [REDACTED]

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Soviet and Libyan Foothold

Communist Connections

US Embassy reporting indicates that Moscow gained influence with the current regime by backing an aggressive group of radical leftists—known as the leaguers—which gradually gained control of the Kerekou government by 1974. The leaguers served as a conduit for Soviet and Cuban propaganda and encouraged the regime's staunch support of Soviet positions in international forums. Numerous US Embassy sources indicate that the Soviets and Cubans have given behind-the-scenes backing to the radicals to maintain their positions in the regime. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, the Soviets increased their influential role with the regime by taking advantage of Kerekou's fears of external threats in the wake of an abortive mercenary attack in early 1977. Since then, the regime has become almost totally dependent for its internal security on the Soviets, their allies, and the Libyans. [REDACTED]

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[redacted] According to the West German Ambassador, East German technicians have installed an elaborate personal security system in the Presidential Palace and Kerekou's residence. [redacted]

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Benin also has established an extensive military relationship with the Soviets. [redacted] Moscow had delivered about \$20 million in military equipment to Benin by 1980, and there are 17 Soviet military technicians assisting the Beninese armed forces. The US Embassy reports that the Soviets still nurture hopes of constructing a military airfield some 100 kilometers northwest of Cotonou. If the airfield is built—and to the proposed length of 3,000 meters—we believe it would be suitable for use by long-range Soviet transport and naval reconnaissance aircraft. The latter presently have to operate from more distant Angola to conduct surveillance of Western naval forces in the Atlantic. In our judgment, the airfield would provide an alternate site to Cotonou, away from public scrutiny, and could serve as a clandestine transit site to support subversive activities in the region. [redacted]

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Libyan Ties

US Embassy reporting indicates that Libya seized on Benin's economic problems and security concerns in the late 1970s to supply significant amounts of financial and military aid. This beachhead allowed Tripoli to cultivate close ties with the radicals. Qadhafi's willingness to provide occasional transfusions of hard currency also made him an important benefactor to the financially pressed government. [redacted]

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[redacted] The US Embassy reports that about 100 Libyans are assigned to the People's Bureau—Libya's diplomatic mission—in Benin. Many of them are involved in joint commercial ventures and economic, social, and cultural projects. [redacted]

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[redacted] at Cotonou has served as a transit point for Libyan flights carrying West Africans recruited from a variety of countries—such as Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal—to and from Tripoli for work, paramilitary training, and ideological indoctrination. The US Embassy in Cotonou estimates that several thousand of these people have been sent to Tripoli via Cotonou thus far. We believe that these Africans, recruited from the ranks of the unemployed in neighboring states, are infiltrated back into their home countries for future use against incumbent governments.

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West African Concerns

Officials in neighboring states repeatedly have expressed concern to US diplomats about Libya's use of Benin as a base for subversive activities. Benin's immediate neighbors—Togo, Upper Volta, Nigeria, and Niger—are all inviting targets for Libyan meddling, in our view. We note that each of these governments has a moderate or pro-Western orientation and good relations with France and the United States. We believe Libya could attempt to stir up unrest among their influential Muslim populations, mainly over mounting local economic problems, and to exploit tribal or regional rivalries. Nigerien President Kountche indicated to US officials late last year that his government had evidence that Libyan-trained Nigerien dissidents have appeared in northern Benin, and expressed fears that they could become an active threat. The Nigerian Charge in Cotonou also reported to US officials last year that West Africans returning to Benin from Libya are instructed to return to their native countries and to work for Libyan agents.

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Pressures for Change

[redacted] over the past year moderate Beninese civilian and military leaders have been pressing Kerekou to adopt more pragmatic policies. They are disillusioned with Moscow's limited economic aid and the quality of its military equipment and training. Reports of coup plotting among moderate elements of the regime prompted Kerekou last April to accede to the moderates' demands that he replace a number of influential radicals in the Cabinet with more moderate members.

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The Economy

US Embassy reporting indicates that the moderates have convinced President Kerekou that the present government's longer term survival depends upon its ability to arrest Benin's economic decline. Benin's weak resource base, coupled with two decades of economic mismanagement, have left it one of the world's poorest countries; its per capita annual income was about \$330 in 1981. According to the US Embassy, the agriculturally based economy—about 80 percent of the country's 3.6 million population is engaged in subsistence farming—is plagued by endemic drought as well as inefficient state-owned enterprises responsible for collecting, processing, and marketing cash crops. Annual food production has decreased steadily since the mid-1970s, raising the prospect of serious food shortages. A small offshore oil deposit of some 22 million barrels of recoverable reserves is Benin's only significant mineral resource. Although the government hopes that oil production—scheduled to begin in mid-1983—will help ease soaring import bills, World Bank studies project that production will peak by 1985 and that the country will return to being a net oil importer by 1989. [] 25X1

According to the US Embassy, excessive government intervention in the markets, a large and inefficient public sector, and massive increases in government spending have brought the official economy to the point of collapse. The US Embassy notes that:

- Exports—primarily palm oil, cotton, and peanuts—have stagnated or declined, while imports have risen sharply.
- The growth of government spending continues to outpace that of revenues, resulting in a growing budget deficit.
- Fairly heavy foreign borrowing and high global interest rates have yielded a sharp jump in debt servicing charges.
- Overall living standards that rose slowly through the mid-1970s, appear to have declined sharply, possibly to preindependence levels. [] 25X1

Only continued Western foreign aid and a thriving black-market trade with Nigeria have enabled Benin to avoid economic disaster, according to US Embassy officials. Western financial institutions (mainly the multilateral official organizations) and bilateral donors, especially France, account for almost 90 percent of Benin's foreign assistance. Although no data are available, illegal commerce with Nigeria has partially offset the impact of the inefficient Marxist economy on the daily lives of the urban population, providing an additional source of income for those who otherwise might be driven to blame the regime for their plight. [] 25X1

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The Military

US Embassy reporting indicates that unhappiness with the Kerekou regime is mounting within the ranks of the 3,200-man armed forces. [REDACTED]

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In our view, regional, tribal, and personal rivalries for the time being hinder the organization of a successful coup and the selection of a widely acceptable replacement for Kerekou. Should the regime be unable to stem further economic decline, however, we believe that chances would increase that disaffected senior army officers or enlisted men would decide to move against Kerekou. Reports from the US Embassy suggest that the politically moderate and pro-French Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Col. Barthelemy Ohouens, is the most likely leader of a takeover. US Embassy officials regard him as the single most powerful military leader and believe he remains fairly popular among the troops, despite his reputation for corruption. [REDACTED]

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Nigerian Influence. We believe that pressure from neighboring Nigeria—West Africa's most powerful state—also has played a part in Benin's turn toward moderation. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Lagos is alert to the subversive danger posed by the Soviet and Libyan foothold in Benin. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Lagos has warned the Kerekou regime on more than one occasion in recent years that it would respond militarily to the introduction of Soviet troops to Benin. [REDACTED] Lagos also has agreed to the Kerekou regime's recent request for Nigerian support for its efforts to move Benin away from Moscow and Tripoli. We believe that further gains for moderation in Benin would encourage other moderate West African states to do more to counter Soviet and Libyan meddling in the region. [REDACTED]

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Signs of Change

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[redacted] President Kerekou, in response to growing pressures for moderation, has attempted to strengthen his hand against the leaguers. Last April, he was able to replace several prominent leftists in the Cabinet with moderates and apolitical technicians. [redacted]

Nevertheless, US Embassy reporting indicates that as the moderates have become more powerful, they have increased pressure on Kerekou to liberalize political life and purge remaining radicals from the government and the ruling party. [redacted]

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According to the US Embassy in Cotonou, the Kerekou government also has begun to move away from Marxist economic policies toward more moderate and pragmatic reforms. Although we believe the regime is unlikely to renounce its goal of building a socialist economy, the US Embassy reports that Kerekou and the moderate faction now recognize that excessive centralization and state ownership have been a mistake. They are encouraging a limited revitalization of the private sector and more Western trade and investment to stem Benin's accelerating economic decline. US Embassy officials note that the government has issued increasing numbers of business permits to small- and medium-sized private companies, invited foreign transport firms to operate in the country, and toned down its anticapitalist propaganda. After soliciting World Bank recommendations on how to reorganize the nearly bankrupt public sector, Kerekou this year abolished some of the most inefficient among Benin's approximately 60 state enterprises, combined others, and reorganized their largely corrupt and incompetent top-level management. [redacted]

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In our view, Benin's growing rapprochement with France is part of Kerekou's effort to check Soviet and Libyan influence and gain greater Western assistance. We believe that the election last year of socialist President Mitterrand helped facilitate Kerekou's efforts to justify closer ties with Paris to his more extreme leftist colleagues by emphasizing the newfound ideological compatability between Benin and France. [redacted]

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We believe the socialist government in Paris also has promoted warmer relations with Cotonou, viewing Benin as one of the countries in Africa where it can help stem Soviet and Libyan gains and enhance its political, economic, and cultural influence. In our view, French interest in Africa remains as strong under President Mitterrand as it was under his predecessors. Mitterrand has a policy of seeking closer ties with Africa's leftist regimes, trading in part on the government's socialist credentials. We believe Paris would like to present radical states like Benin with more of an alternative to Moscow and Tripoli. To highlight improved relations, according to the US Embassy in Paris, Mitterrand early next year will pay the first official visit to Benin by a French chief of state. [REDACTED]

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We believe that Kerekou has been forced to turn more to France in search of additional aid as the country's economic plight has deepened and as Moscow and Tripoli proved unwilling to take on Benin as an economic client.³ The willingness of France and its European Community partners—especially West Germany, which is Benin's second-ranking benefactor—to provide additional aid will be critical to Benin's moderating trend and the further curtailment of Soviet and Libyan influence there. [REDACTED]

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At Kerekou's request, according to the US Embassy, Paris has resumed modest military and security aid to Benin, breaking the Soviet and Libyan monopoly in this field. [REDACTED]

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The US Embassy reports that Cotonou has taken significant steps in the last year to improve strained relations with Washington. The Beninese Foreign Minister made an official demarche to normalize Beninese-US relations in May 1982 and has followed up with specific proposals ranging from visits to Benin by US Government leaders to creation of a mixed Benin-US commission to deal with political relations, cultural exchanges, and economic cooperation. Reporting from the US Charge in Cotonou indicates that there is a new openness and cordiality toward US diplomats

³ According to US Embassy reporting, France continued to be Benin's largest source of economic aid even after Cotonou embraced Marxism in the 1970s and political and military relations with Paris dwindled. French expatriates continue to manage most vital transport and public utility services, and the regime, despite its Marxist policies, remains in the Franc zone. [REDACTED]

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by formerly hostile Beninese functionaries and a sharp decrease in official media criticism of Washington. Most recently, the director general of Benin's national Defense Ministry has requested US military equipment and training. [REDACTED]

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**Pace of
Disengagement:
Determining Factors**

We believe that the steadily deteriorating economy will encourage the regime to explore closer cooperation with the West in the hope of obtaining increased economic assistance. In our view, President Kerekou probably would pursue more actively the rapprochement with France, Benin's principal hope for new aid and investment. Unless the downward economic spiral is stemmed, Kerekou will face a growing risk of a coup, or of being removed by constitutional means. Kerekou faces reelection in 1983 by the 320-member National Assembly, which makes its selection from candidates proposed by the ruling party's 45-man central committee. We believe this could force Kerekou to move in the near term to ensure his continued support within the party by purging radicals from influential party positions. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, the extent of Western support for Benin's turn toward moderation is another crucial factor that will help determine the pace of Beninese disengagement from the Soviets and Libyans. According to the US Charge in Cotonou, the French have told Benin that they will not resume full military aid and cooperation until Benin severs all military ties with Moscow. We believe that the newly strengthened moderates might

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either intensify pressure on Kerekou to risk such a break with Moscow, or attempt to overthrow him themselves if they become convinced that Paris will provide essential backing for such a move. [REDACTED]

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In our view, Moscow and Tripoli clearly recognize the implications of Kerekou's new cordiality to the West and will seek ways to reassert their influence in Benin. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the Western Powers

We believe that Benin probably will continue to move toward more moderate, pragmatic policies, but within certain limits. Economic desperation probably will push the regime toward closer ties to the West in search of more assistance. The increasingly influential moderate faction probably will continue to press Kerekou to dilute the radicals' power and reduce the regime's dependence on Moscow and Tripoli. We believe, however, that Kerekou—in his weakened position—will find it difficult to resolve longstanding intragovernment squabbling that will hinder a more fundamental political reorientation toward the West. [REDACTED]

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US leverage is generally limited to the influence of bilateral economic aid and support from international financial institutions. We believe neither is likely to induce prompt overhaul of Benin's institutions or fundamental changes in its policies. In addition, the limited market potential for US investors and the likelihood of continued political ferment in Benin probably will deter any real increase in US trade and private investment.⁴

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We also believe the turn toward moderation could quickly be reversed. We judge that the extreme leftists will try to regain political predominance with the backing of their foreign patrons. If further Libyan and Soviet plotting comes to light, this could convince Kerekou that the political risk of a complete ouster of the leaguers would be too great. In our view, should

⁴ US assistance to Benin presently is limited to modest food aid under the PL-480 program and a Peace Corps presence of some 79 volunteers. According to IMF figures, US exports to Benin—largely consumer goods—totaled \$19 million in 1981 while the United States imported \$1 million worth of primarily palm oil products. There was no direct US investment in Benin as of 1980, according to the US Embassy. [REDACTED]

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Paris then grow reluctant to provide additional aid, the regime would become increasingly vulnerable to demands from Moscow and Tripoli on behalf of the radicals. Moreover, we believe that the radicals' sympathizers in the military might, under such circumstances, try to rally support for the leaguers among the lower ranks with promises of redressing such grievances as rampant government corruption and low pay and slow promotions.

[REDACTED] 25X1

In the event that the internal power struggle continues unabated and Kerekou's authority is further eroded, we believe the beleaguered regime probably would be toppled. We estimate that moderate officers would be the most likely leaders of a coup in view of the growing sentiment against Marxism and the regime from this quarter. A government led by moderates probably would continue to reduce Soviet and Libyan ties and abandon strident Marxist policies. Senior military leaders probably would turn even further to France for military and security assistance in addition to crucial economic support.

[REDACTED] 25X1

A coup by military and civilian leaders embittered by the regime's turn toward moderation also is possible, although less likely in our view because of the weaker position of the radicals in the military. A takeover by senior military officers who sympathize with the radicals would almost certainly mean that the leaguers and their Soviet and Libyan backers would regain political predominance. The increased dependence of any radical successor on Communist and Libyan support would, in our view, also further the opportunities for Tripoli to use Benin as a base for regional subversion. In the event of a radical takeover in Benin, neighboring moderate states could become more accommodating to Qadhafi by supporting Tripoli's positions in international forums in hopes of deflecting Libyan subversive activity.

[REDACTED] 25X1

We believe a diminished Soviet and Libyan presence in Benin—either under Kerekou or a successor—would reduce opportunities for subversion in neighboring moderate states and improve prospects for regional stability. Moreover, Western responsiveness to Cotonou's economic needs during its turn away from Moscow and Tripoli could bolster the confidence of all moderate West African states. If Benin continues to move away from close Soviet and Libyan ties, we believe US interests will benefit from Cotonou's greater objectivity in international forums and its reduced hostility toward the US diplomatic community.

[REDACTED] 25X1

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